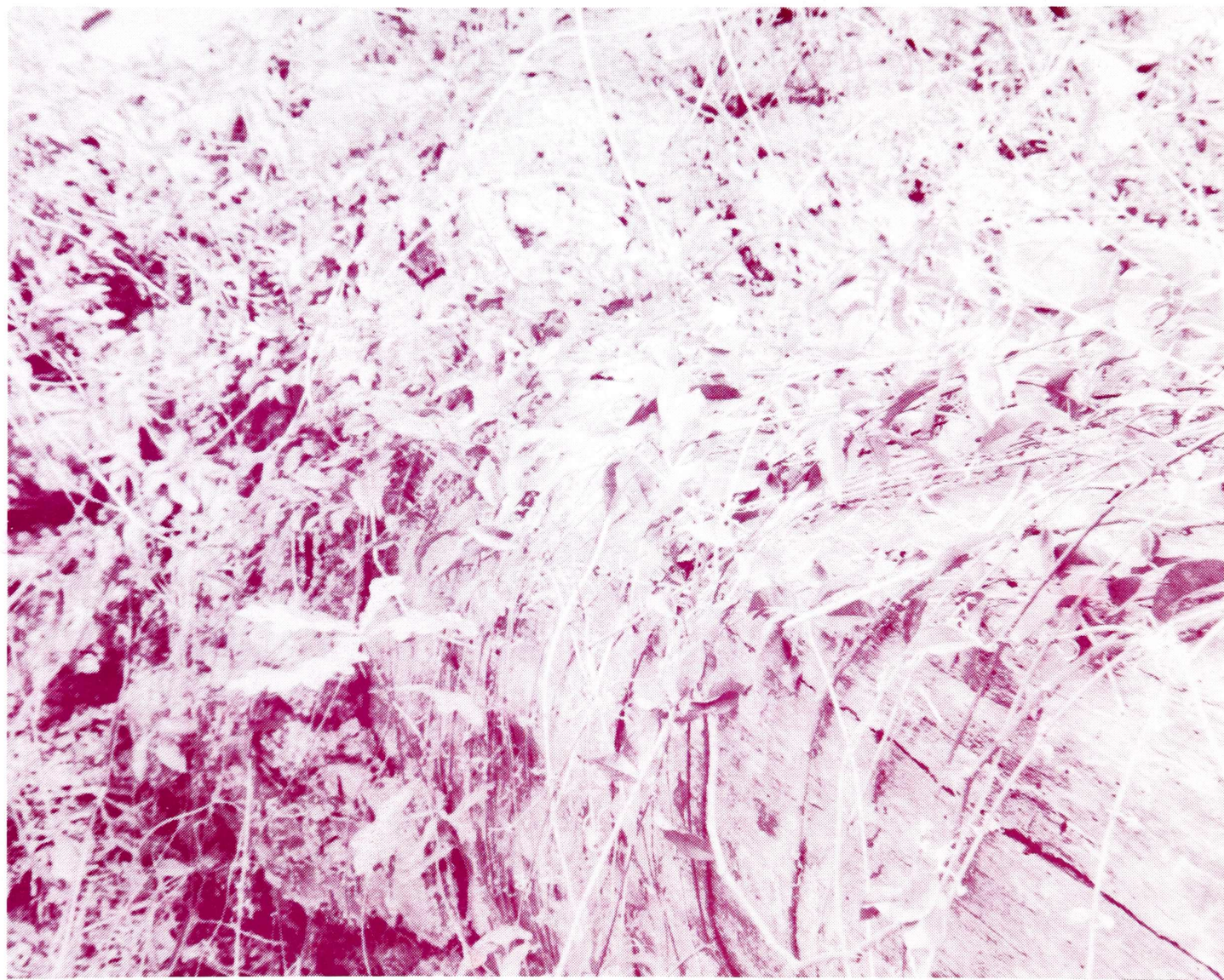


ARDEN

Columbus State University's Literary Journal
Volume 3 Issue 1



Letter from the Editor,

This journal, a product of many people's work and creativity, is the third since its inception. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to have been the editor of it since it began. This is the last year I will be editing *Arden* and, appropriately, the work contained in this issue is some of the best. I am thankful to all the contributors, as they have voluntarily shared their work with each person who read this issue.

The pieces contained within these pages are the heart and soul of each of their creators. They represent many themes, some academic, some emotional, but all are part of the art of creative writing that must be present in any culture.

Over the last three years, many people and entities have provided time, effort and support to keep this journal alive. The original advisor, Dr. Noreen Lape, was instrumental in the beginnings of *Arden*, giving time and energy. The Language and Literature faculty has been supportive with constructive criticism and endorsement. Student Activities, led by Mr. Larry Kees, has provided the financial support without which *Arden* would have never come to fruition. The present advisor for *Arden*, Dr. Susan Georgecink, has given constant encouragement and has been a great help through the production process. To all these people, I thank you. The need for an outlet of creative writing was heard and met with open arms and helping hands.

Thank You,

John Kocian

The cover photo, entitled "Mind Games," was taken by Jennifer Naugle.

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Advisor: Dr. Susan Georgecink

Editor: John Kocian

Associate Editor: Jessica Trenchik

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1967

Sun-beaten black vinyl seats –

Hot as hell!

And the smell?

A delicate mixture between gasoline and grandparents,

But I couldn't always put a finger on it.

Thirty plus years, antique tag and all...

Rumbling all two hundred eighty nine cubic

Inches under the light.

(You were better than him, he wasn't so sure.)

But my horses saw the green glow coming miles away,

Bursting out of their reigns-

Jumping the line -

Finishing 1st-

As always.

Jessica Trenchik

Christopher Allen

Spelunking with dad
nearly eight years old now
cherub's cheeks and dirty jeans
Standing at the mouth of a cave that could swallow him,
and at the edge of a world that wants to
Smiling, shining his flashlight,
not knowing...
Little boy, with little boy hands and scabby knees,
stay where you are

Franz Kafka's Balloon

There's a balloon outside my window.
 (if that's what the round thing is)
 A small inconvenience in my view, I admit,
 but what are windows for, after all?
 It's not that I miss the sight of my neighbor's house.
 I'm not overly fond of aluminum siding,
 orange-brick chimneys, or broken roof tiles.
 Still, it is my view—
 one that normally does not include balloons.
 And although there is some novelty
 in seeing a balloon at my window
 (if it is a balloon at all),
 one is always afraid that the newness
 may soon wear off or become strange
 in a world where uncertainty is certain,
 believing is seeing,
 and everyone's guilty of something.

Is this a balloon (what else could it be?)
 meant only for my window? A law unto itself?
 A runaway children's balloon lost while playing tag?
 It's much too big, I think.
 A weather balloon, I guess.
 Why do weathermen want to know
 the weather outside my window?
 Are they perhaps baby weathermen run amok?
 Gleeefully releasing weather balloons
 beneath people's windows to find out who's "it"?

The balloon isn't black or white.
 Is it a huge soccer ball on a string?
 (with my window its goal?)
 Now it's bumping against the spotless glass
 like a nervous dog.
 Maybe it's impatient to see me—
 trying to tell me something vital—
 even save my life.
 But does it have to bump so much?

It does, of course, only appear
 to be a weather balloon,
 and many things appear
 to be a weather balloon.
 without being one.
 And vice versa.
 Still, it does have that unmistakable . . .
 weatherballoony look.

Do the people who sent it here
 know what it's doing?
 Perhaps I should tell them to curb their balloon.
 Trace the string remorselessly.
 (Only to find myself
 absent-mindedly holding the other end?)
 Or send them a firm, polite message by balloon.
 Find the thoughtless balloonatics
 who aren't aware that their balloon
 is misbehaving at my window and tell them.
 (if there is a balloon at all)

Metaphysical Calm

streetlamp immobile like a rusted robot eye
 frozen shadows on streetcorner snowmounds
 black gouged into lifeless white
 miniature mooncraters and mountains

thin layer of feathery snow untouched on the street
 squared-off snowmound jutting up like a tombstone

treebranches, silhouetted against the darkening night,
 crisscrossed like nets in the cold,
 hang in the streetlamp silence,
 still as a De Chirico painting

quiet now, except faint echoes of barking dogs
 quiet now, except far-away train rumbling
 quiet

above, now, in the sea of black,
 flashing green and red airplane lights
 sail tugboat-slow, soft hum of motors trailing

mounted on the clear, black sky
 the infinite necklaces of stars

Joseph Francavilla

Three Questions

"My dear Glaucon, would we not be just in banning poetry?"

--Plato,
The Republic

My dear Plato:

How just is the chaotic wind
playing a minor hymn to the moon
through tangled, rosy-fingered trees
in the wine-dark evening?

How just is a noiseless, patient spider,
spinning its crazy diamond web,
without models or blueprints?

How just is the poetry, story, and myth
surrounding you and your teacher,
that increases even as I address you—
inspired son of Apollo,
Dionysian poet of shadows on cave walls—
in this most disordered
and insidious of art forms,
which you so justly deem madness?

The Looking Game
dedicated to Trey, who was right when he said I'd never forget

across a crowded room our eyes meet
and I think
you know this could be interesting
so I look away 'cause even I know
the rules of this game—I look again
and you're still looking
 --looking incredible--
we both sort of smile and look away
look away just in time to see
your friend walking my way
hey baby what are you ladies doing tonight
and he is drunk off his ass
 so I look at you again
 and pretend I don't see you
 looking right back at me
that's when I realize the drunk guy is your friend
and I laugh and you laugh
 we both agree with him when he says
 hell, I'm a drunk idiot
and when I look again and watch you
looking at me and watching me
I see you laugh and I think about you
the way you look when you smile makes me think
 what the hell?
'cause this is my night and I see
by the way you're looking at me
that you want this as badly as
 I do.
and you look at me once more
 look into my eyes
 and tickle my chin
 before you walk away
but we meet up again
 still looking
and I look at you
 --and god do I like what I see--
you introduce yourself
and ask me if I'll invite you to join me
 so i think what the hell
 and we go sit down
 together.
I'm a nice guy you say the nicest you'll ever meet
and god that shirt turns me on
and I'm not too drunk
and you're beautiful
and there's a party tonight
and you could go with me
I look at you and think god I want to
but I say no you're a little too drunk
 for me
and I don't know you
maybe we'll see each other again

--and you won't be so drunk--
 --and I won't be so scared--
 --and I won't feel like I'm looking
 into the eyes of the most beautiful man
 I'll ever have a chance to meet--
 and you laugh and look at me and say
 that's bullshit
 but I still think you're beautiful.
 and you softly touch the shirt that turns you on
 and you turn my head so that I'm looking right at you
 which is exactly what I don't need to do
 and you go in for the kill
 but I look away moments before I fall in love
 wild thing I think I love you
 sings the band
 but I wanna know for sure
 you wanna know for sure you say
 and I nod because I do
 but I don't wanna look at you anymore
 god we would be perfect together you say
 but I might break you're heart
 and I laugh and say you probably would
 but you say it would be worth it
 because you're beautiful and I noticed you
 as soon as you walked in
 I noticed you too I say
 but I can't do this
 --because I don't know you--
 --because you're a little too drunk--
 --because I've never done anything quite like this--
 --and girls with boyfriends shouldn't play games--
 and for one moment
 the moment I will never forget
 you stop being drunk and just look
 and you say:

*"if you don't do this you'll never forget me
 and for the rest of your life you'll wonder
 what if that guy I met that time was the one
 but you'll never know
 will you?"*

and then you are drunk once more
 but I still know you're right
 and that makes me mad
 because we just met and you already know me
 but it also makes me want to cry
 because you're more beautiful now than you were
 and I want you
 and you want me
 and I think maybe I love you already
 and we sit there
 looking at each other
 reading each others' minds
 and bodies
 and I know I'm not this strong

and I can't hold out much longer.
and you say please
--and I want to say yes--
and put your hand on my leg
--and I want to say no--
and you arm around me
and I want to say no but my body says yes
--and I love it--
--and I want more--
--and it feels so good--
--and god does it feel right--
our eyes meet and you pull me closer
and hold me tighter
I look at you
and see you look at me
and you're closer than ever now
and I could move my lips just a little
and my world would never be the same.
over the noise
I hear you whisper in my ear
you want to kiss me so bad you can't stand it
and I nod in agreement as we look
and you know you're right
and I know you're right
but I also know you feel the same
and I lean in a little closer
but I know I can't do this
even though your hand is on my chin pulling me closer still
and even though your eyes are begging
and your lips are parting
and even though I need this
--god I need this--
but this looking game hurts more than I thought it would
so I pat your leg as you rub my thigh
and I look at you once more
it was nice to meet you I say
as I am standing up
still looking
and still wanting
but still leaving
without looking back.

Dorothy Cheruiyot

Special branch

A special branch of a tree
whose leaves brush over your head
every minute you sit under the tree
whose strokes are always soothing
whose tender touches are always relaxing
and the sounds enchanting
the special branch of a tree
which is hardly broken by a thunder storm
never dries even in the dry seasons
well a true friend is like the special branch

Listen to me

Can you listen to me!
There is something I have to tell you.
It is very important
so please listen.
It will make a big difference,
if you would only listen.
You will see the other side,
only after you listen to me.
You must hear what I am going to say,
what I have been keeping in my heart,
protecting it, like a tender egg,
which would break if dropped,
just listen to me.
Today I am going to drop it.
I cannot keep it any more,
it will blow my heart,
if I keep it any longer
pleaseListen to me!

Before Solitude

I can now say that I was once in love before I stroll in the worlds of solitude
I will know what it is to yearn for someone instead of something;
To surrender my defenses and allow the wall to fall
In the end the pain is immense, but worth a great deal more in the knowledge of oneself
The tears are bitter and rarely sweet, but it shall cleanse the soul
The agonizing soul in process becomes engulfed in self-doubt;
Endless questions emphasize the emptiness of what is left of the mind;
And the heart struggles to take a beat while still piecing itself together
The fog of sadness is the hardest to grip and rid of,
But one night when suddenly awakened it will vanish
The silence is deafening and yet so loud leaving numbness in the spirit
And yet, time continues and survival is of the utmost importance
And then it occurs!
The silence is greeted by normalcy and life continues until the walk in the world of solitude.

Jacob Elliot

You're A Shooting Star

Blazing shooting stars fall to the cold earth
They want to warm your soul, spark your deep depths
Remove the void you feel, give you rebirth
If only you would forget sins you swept
Tell me where you are, so I can find you
I promise you will no longer be harmed
Because the night sky will keep its pure blue
And the moon will hang low for your own charm
Your beauty and brilliance have overwhelmed
Illumination blinds evil darkness
Escape with me to an unknown lost realm
No one will ever find our secret kiss
Stay with me always and forever here
So the skies can keep our hearts out of fear

HAIKUS

Was stability
Sought invincibility
Found fragility

There's a ringing in
My ears, so I think I have
Fried my cilia

Glisten in your eyes
It seemed likely you would cry
Asking yourself why

McDonald's fast food
Fattening saltine delight
Tasty going down

Uncomplicated
Irony lies there within
Of difficulty

Owning the world
Is peculiar to my brain
Who would want this place?

Come visit my dreams
Beneath the sun, stars, and moon
I can be your life

Screwy things happen
My brain cells pop left and right
What an intense high

Andrea Lewis

Vincent
never vince
born as replacement
surreal
Beginning

Man and more
Adored by gods
Fatally blessed
Maimed victim of Himself

himself

Tarnished by religion
touched by Humanity
heart UNFULFILLED
Theo Sien

Where art thou?
uncensored
however

Dependent

Brilliance Unequivocal
Mosaic
Iconoclastic voices taking over
Self DESTRUCTION
ending

Sadly
Eminent

Bang

Glenn Wells

When I was young

When I was young
And Dorothy barely past puberty,
I knew that Oz was on top of the clouds.
I could get there only
Through some extraordinary effort.
Flying wouldn't do it;
I'd flown before,
And airplanes had no magic.
It would take something like
Lassoing a cloud
And climbing up the rope.
But I couldn't find enough rope
And couldn't even throw what I had
Up to its full length.
So I quit trying,
And the clouds dissipated into vapor
In the summer heat
Of adolescence.

Woman Thoughts

Autumn

Autumn's chilly return

Awakens memories of

Those loved---yet lost.

Him

He loves me---not because of ;

But in spite of.

Miscarriage

In summer, Life fills the hallowed halls

But by fall, they echo their emptiness.

Time

Oh Time ! Thou governess of my soul,

The mistress of my mind.

#132

Hate is consummated but remains

Unborn---birth yeilds to one painful

Sob of love.

Depression

Make me small, make me an embryo,

Safe, warm, secure from all.

Sometimes I write poetry

"Lo que se tiene es siempre poesía," Heberto Padilla

Now I sip this wine as red as the sky this morning,
 maroon, almost, just above the pines on these last
 ridges of the Appalachians, where Georgia clay
 soon gives way to the sand of ancient seas.
 It's fall, and the maple trees are yellow,
 so brilliant in the early sun against the longleaf green.
 I wanted to take you out in that bright day,
 along some ridge where I would park and point
 to you the green horizon, the possibilities from
 which I choose to fashion this calm life.

Did I say calm? Appearances are deceiving.
 The steady way in which I learn the landscape,
 the history of each place I've lived, the flora--
 see the wild ginger there? tear that heart-
 shaped leaf and sniff its clove-like scent--
 is but a palliative for the vertigo of change.
 But what I cannot place in some still center of earth or sky
 is now subsumed by will into this smaller canvas.

Anita Dugat-Greene

THE VIEW FROM URANUS (Or from whatever heaven there is)

In Memory of Heberto Padilla

"Oh Dios, dínos dónde, por qué.

No sólo hay un miércoles de ceniza en nuestra vida.

Hacia ese camposanto

todo el mundo camina con el mismo miedo,

los mismos ojos, los mismo pies." Heberto Padilla, de "El cementerio de Princeton"

One pole toward the sun, one pole toward the unknown,
 Uranus wobbles its unsure way through the solar system,
 spinning on its side like some drunken poet seeking the muse
 in a bottle, or maybe just trying to forget, casting
 one cold eye toward the future and all those stars,
 one eye toward the fire that still burns dimly at the center,
 its eccentric rotation a reminder that old wounds—
 a sidewise swipe of a comet, a planetary collision—
 can change a body forever, whether heavenly or earthly,
 and set a course only another catastrophe can alter:
 then the collapsing of the heart that holds all things together,
 and both poles tumbling now into infinite space.

John Kocian

Reformatory Dean

I miss Dean Moriarty,
The Denver reformatory Dean,
craze-minded Dean,
who drove into South American
steam jungle with no
headlights
screaming into midnight
blackness
like a light brigade
charge to wisdom and pure
thought,
cross-legged Dean,
who sat hours on end
through SoHo winter
held attention to mindful speech,
the new Generation Dean,
who loved tea and sweet
girls from all over,
married, made,
and breathed sweet life.
I miss the Dean left alone
on Lower East Side streetcorner.

The Life Not Taken or
A Hunter's Lament

Two bucks cross paths in a winter wood,
And sorry I could not shoot them both
And be one hunter, long I stood
And aimed at one as long as I could
Until it bent to eat the undergrowth.

Then took the other, with darker hair,
On which I had perhaps a better aim
Because it was bigger and just stood there
And looked at me without a care
As if we were playing a little game.

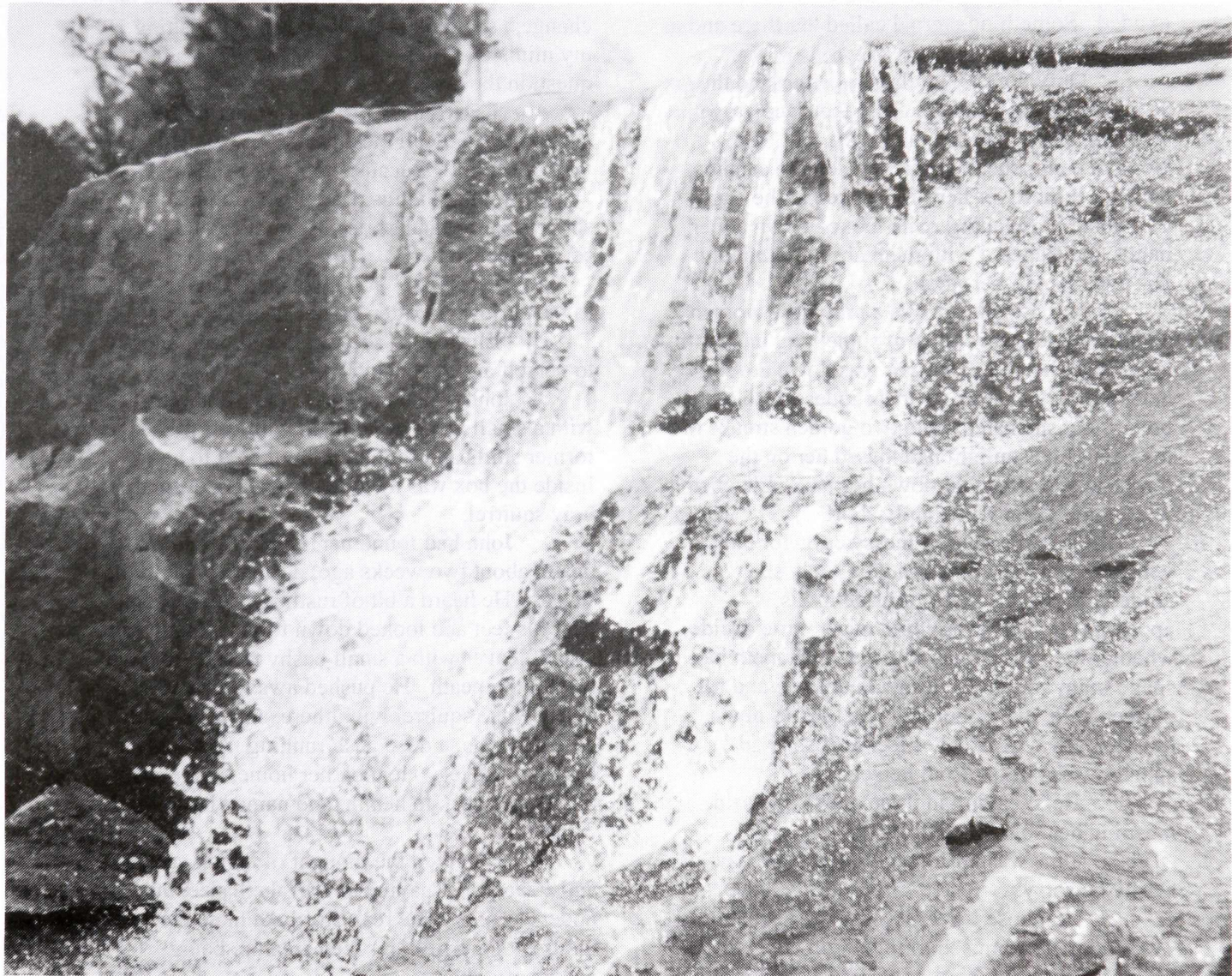
And both just sauntered on their way
With their grown majestic rack
Oh, I let them both live another day
Knowing well what my buddies would say
One might even have a heart attack.

I shall tell them a harmless lie
Or say some words in my defense,
Two bucks crossed paths in a wood, and I-
I fired to shots into the sky
And that has made all the difference.



Water

Water is the most abundant and essential substance on Earth. It is the source of life and the medium through which all biological processes take place. Water is also a powerful solvent, capable of dissolving a wide range of minerals and organic compounds. This makes it an essential component of the Earth's crust and the atmosphere. Water is also a key factor in the formation of clouds and precipitation, which are essential for the water cycle. The water cycle is a continuous process that moves water between the Earth's surface and the atmosphere. It is driven by the sun's energy, which causes water to evaporate from the surface and rise into the air. As the water rises, it cools and condenses into clouds. When the clouds become heavy enough, they release precipitation in the form of rain or snow. This precipitation then falls back to the Earth's surface, where it can be absorbed by the ground or flow into bodies of water. The water cycle is a vital part of the Earth's ecosystem, and it is essential for the survival of all life on the planet.



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Untitled

A light shone in John Lanford's window. She had gone to him. If you asked her, she would not have been able to tell you why. Like the frail, wispy moth that danced about in the lantern's glow, she only knew that her uncertain soul danced in the warmth he exuded. Something eternal called her there and she rarely failed to answer.

Only the tiny moth bore witness to the scene that night hid away from the sleepy town. They sat before the fire, he, to the left, on a wooden chair, she, near his feet, on the cushion he had set there for her. He looked at the pages of a book, not reading. She looked down at her hands and fidgeted with them absent mindedly. His eyes sought her often.

She, Elizabeth, was a miniature woman, a perfectly scaled version of something much larger than herself. Her hair was down around her shoulders. It was a sort-of indescribable brown that she hated, with two golden streaks in the front, like sunlight had kissed her on the forehead and streamed down her face. Elizabeth was petite. John was simply short.

He had a mop of messy curls for hair, which secretly she loved, but publicly she chided him for his "lack of pride in his appearance." His eyes could never quite decide whether they were blue or green. Elizabeth had spend many nights thinking about them and his perfect teeth and wondering what it was about him that always made her feel as if she had somehow separated from herself.

"He's leaving in three days," she said, meaning her soldier.

"Oh," was all John could say. He could hardly be sorry.

"I suppose I'll wait for him," she continued. "I promised to write him everyday. I'm to decide what kind of house I want him to build for me when comes back and tell him about it in my letters."

John said nothing.

Elizabeth rested her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand. With her free hand she twisted strands of hair around her fingers, alternately winding and unwinding. John

watched her for several minutes, silent, entranced.

"Am I too assume then," he said finally, "that these visits, once said soldier is gone, would no longer be deemed appropriate?"

"I don't see why anything should change," she replied softly. "I'm just visiting my minister. I don't see how anyone could question the propriety of that."

"I see. Just a girl visiting her minister."

"Don't call me a girl."

"Why? Because you're a woman?"

"What I am is tired of your company," she said and began to rise. A faint scratching sound stopped her.

"Elizabeth," John whispered in answer to the curiosity written on her face.

"Elizabeth," she whispered back, mostly to herself and sat back down.

John walked over to a table and returned with a small wood crate lined with soft folds of former shirts and sat on the floor next to her. Inside the box was the other Elizabeth, a small gray squirrel.

John had found her, nearly bleeding to death, about two weeks ago, during a walk in the woods. He heard a bit of rustling coming from near his feet and looked down to see a quivering pile of leaves with a small bushy tail sticking out from underneath. He pushed away the leaves and saw the squirrel lying there, shivering with cold and pain, a deep gash running the length of her hind left leg. He took her home, awkwardly nursed her back to health, and named her Elizabeth.

John liked the thought of taking care of an Elizabeth, of having an Elizabeth sleeping under his roof. The real Elizabeth liked the thought of a pitiful, rescued creature being named after her.

Elizabeth instantly loved her namesake, as John knew she would. That was simply her character. She loved anything that needed her.

The three of them sat before the fire. John put the tiny, warm creature into Elizabeth's hands. Their fingers touched for a moment. It

should have been fleeting, meaningless, even unnoticed. But it wasn't.

Elizabeth gently stroked the animal to sleep. The movement of her small, cradling hands and fingers was hypnotizing to John. He reached over to stroke her hair. She closed her eyes, instinctively. Even with her eyes closed she could still see him, in stark black, always. He was standing before the masses, preaching what she knew he didn't believe. She leaned into touch.

Sometimes they laughed together. Sometimes they argued. And sometimes, like tonight, there was silence. The nights of silence had grown more numerous lately. Tonight, with

the news that the shield, the buffer that made it unnecessary and unfavorable to confront any truths was leaving in three days, the silence was deafening.

John stroking Elizabeth, Elizabeth stroking the squirrel, suddenly it was too much. She rose, silently and gracefully. She placed Elizabeth in her box and began putting on her coat and gloves. John needed no explanation.

"He's leaving in three days and you're here with me," was all he said.

"I'm sneaking out later tonight to meet him," she said, hand on the door. "I'm a woman. I can't send him off to war a boy."

The Killing of a Soul

Dr. Vera Darien's office is nested along a row of lawyer offices on Thirty-eighth Street in the historic district of downtown Charlotte, North Carolina. Vera was a therapist that would often take patients that were recommended to her through the courts or criminal defense lawyers. A trial lawyer named Bruce Howe had called Vera the night before. Bruce wanted Vera to see this woman before he took her on as a client. After talking to Bruce, Vera agreed to take this woman as a patient.

It was Monday, September 30, 1985, 8:00 a.m. and Vera sat in front of her newest patient, not knowing where to start. She knew this patient would be a challenge but deep down she knew she could help, or could she? Vera's office was only lit by what light could make it through each slit within the vertical blinds that hung in front of the three long paneled windows. The light coming in from the windows reflected off a mirror hanging on the sidewall in the room. The mirror, a large beveled oval mirror that was encased into an antique gold frame, faced Vera from where she sat in the room.

The woman was tall but had a small frame. Vera could tell by the outline of the woman's shoulders her hair was past them. The light from the windows hit across the woman's knees exposing her worn blue jeans. Vera tried hard to see the face of her new patient, but the lighting was poor. She at least wanted to see into her eyes. Vera could tell a lot by looking into a person's eyes. Vera believed a person's eyes were the window to their soul. She tried hard to act as though she could see her patient's face, but all she could see was a dark outline of the woman that sat in front of her with the mirror in the background.

Vera was a little apprehensive. She didn't know where to start. She had seen a thousand patients before, but this one was like her first. Vera finally spoke, "So, why don't we start?" "Tell me your name."

The woman was silent. She appeared to look down at the floor.

"Is she counting the floorboards?" Vera thought to herself. Vera brought her eyebrows together and opened her mouth enough to slide

her tongue across her top lip, trying to think of a way to get this started.

The woman looked up and said, "Do you mind if I smoke?"

There was dead silence for what seemed a minute or so until Vera said, "Oh... oh, no, I don't mind, let me get you an ashtray." Vera quickly got up and walked over to her oversized solid oak desk in front of the first of the three windows. She opened the bottom right hand drawer. While fishing around for an ashtray she said loudly, "So... Bruce told me in our conversation over the phone that you are upset over something you feel was taken from you." She then pulled her hand out of the oversize drawer and took out a glass ashtray she had picked up at a psychology conference last May.

Vera walked over to the woman and as she reached towards the small end table next to her, she noticed the woman's long straight hair that seemed to be neatly combed only on the left side. Vera could not decide on the exact color of her hair, it just seemed to be of a dark brown. "There you go," Vera said cheerfully as she placed the ashtray down on the marble top table.

Vera proceeded to sit back down but decided to retrieve her sweater that hung on the back of her office door. Vera thought the room had a chill left over from the night before. Vera said to the woman, "Sorry for the chill in here." "It will warm up as the morning goes by." "The building manger won't turn the heat on until late next month." Vera walked back over to her chair to sit down, but before her back would lie against the back of her chair, the woman spoke as she struck the match against her matchbook.

"My name is Bonnie... Bonnie Parker." Bonnie's voice was almost child like in tone, but firm. Bonnie then lit her cigarette. From the light of the match, Vera got a quick glance at Bonnie's face. She was very pale and thin, with straight dark hair. Vera couldn't help but notice with the mirror in front of her, the blinds were moving slightly from a draft. She tried to focus on her patient and not let the blinds distract her.

Vera sat back a little more and shifted her weight to the right and put her right hand up to the side of her head to hold it up. With a

puzzled look on her face she said, "Do you want to start by telling me what happened yesterday?"

Bonnie looked away towards the windows. She stared at them and then took a drag of her cigarette. While turning her head back at Vera she said quietly, "No, I'm not ready to talk about that just yet."

"What do you want to talk about, Bonnie?"

Bonnie didn't answer. She just inhaled off her cigarette. Bonnie tilted her head back and blew out the smoke. She then looked straight at Vera, through the smoke surrounding her, Vera could almost see her eyes; she could definitely tell Bonnie was squinting them a bit. "My father, I want to talk about my father." "He's the reason for what I did yesterday."

"O.K.," said Vera, "Let's talk about your father."

Bonnie in a high-pitched voice, but still soft, said, "He won't listen to me." "He thinks I'm stupid." "He also ignores my feelings." Bonnie looked down at the floor then held her head up to take another drag from her cigarette. Whispering "I'm nothing to him." Bonnie look straight at Vera again "He has also stolen something very precious from me and he got away with it."

"What?" Vera asked while shaking her head.

"My soul." Bonnie said it like she had just lost the one person in the world that she ever cared about.

"How could your father steal your soul?"

Bonnie continued, "It started when his dad, Ben, died" "My grandfather, Ben Parker, started the business when I was five." "It's a sporting goods store." "Called 'The Locker Room.'" "He sold locally, but right before he died he had gotten some contracts from a couple of pro sports teams." "I guess the pressure got to him." "His wife, Florence, my grandmother, didn't want him to sell to the pro teams." "She was worried about the extra work load and was afraid they would have to stay around the store more." "They had gotten the business to a point where they could travel without worrying too much about what would happen while they were gone." "She just wanted to spend money." "His money, my grandfather's money." "Selling to

pro teams meant increased inventory and shipping out of state." "He bought a computer to keep up with the inventory." "My grandmother took the computer back." "She told him it would be too hard to learn to operate." "She just didn't want inventory to be controlled that much!" "She knew her son, my father, was stealing sports equipment and selling it to the pawn shop across town." "She didn't want my grandfather to find out." "She would do anything to protect her son." "He does no wrong in her eyes."

Vera interrupted, "What about your grandmother?" "Do you have a relationship with her?"

"No." in a deep tone.

"Why don't you have a relationship with her?"

"Because she can't stand the fact I don't need her." "She needs power to survive." "She has to have power over everyone." "I'm too head strong for her to have any power over me." "She can't stand that!" "So, she tries her best to tear anything I do down." "She tries to convince me and anyone associated with me that I'm incompetent." "I helped my grandfather run that store from the time I was seven till I was eighteen." "We ran it together while my father hung out with his low life friends at the bar and my grandmother ran around town buying jewelry for me and herself and more knick knacks for her house." "All junk if you ask me." "My grandparents paid my father a salary even though he hardly ever showed up to work at the store." "He was good at spending his money though." "Not on me, he didn't even pay child support to my Mom half the time." "My father would spend his money on himself, cars, and trips to Vegas."

"When my grandfather died, it was the saddest day of my life." "I couldn't take it." "I thought I would go insane." "But I didn't." "A week after the funeral and every one had gone, I started back at the store working." "I worked a few more years." "My grandmother tried to run the store, but failed miserably at it." "She knew how to be a customer, but she didn't know how to sell." "I had not gotten a thing after my grandfather's death." "He had left everything to my grandmother." "Over the first two years after my grandfather died, she had given all my grandfather's things to my father." "His gun

collection, his collection of old baseball cards and anything else my father asked for, his mother gave him." "My father still didn't work at the store." "He supported himself by selling my grandfather's things and whatever he could steal from the store and sell."

Vera brought her head forward and leaned slightly to the right, she looked puzzled and said, "Why do you think they buy so many material things, Bonnie?"

Bonnie answered swiftly with a snappy tone, "Because, because they're unhappy." "They are so unhappy that they buy things to make them happy." "The things they buy only make them happy for the moment, so they have to keep buying." Bonnie got quiet as she pulled out another cigarette from the box. She put it in her mouth then struck another match. Bonnie lit the cigarette giving Vera another quick glance at her soul. Bonnie shook the match putting it out, and then placed it in the ashtray. Bonnie continued after taking a drag of her newly lit cigarette, "They will never find happiness."

"One day, I was working at the store and my grandmother walked in and told everyone she had an announcement." "All the employees including me gathered around her." "She said, 'I'm leaving the store and Jim, my son, is buying me out.' 'He will run the store now.'" "I could not believe my ears!" "She sold him the business!" "She never even asked me if I wanted it."

"Did you ask her why?" Vera was now beginning to have compassion for this woman, a woman who has been troubled with her family for years.

Bonnie said, "Yes, I did ask her." "My grandmother said to me." "Well, you have a hard time understanding business things and your father has been around it longer than you have." "He is better off taking the business off my hands than you." "I was in shock!" "The next day, I came into the store to work and my father came up to me." "He said to me, 'You are to have nothing to do with this store and this store has nothing to do with you!'"

"What did you do?"

"I collected my things and I left the store." "His wife let me know I was banned from the store." "So, I went to Duke University." "I studied nursing." Bonnie had

gotten a little more aggressive in her tone of voice. "I paid my own way, I never got a dime from my grandmother or my father." "I became an LPN." "I worked for the county health department." "My grandmother got rich from her payments my father gave her for the store along with my grandfather's life insurance policy." "My father and his wife just got rich off the sporting goods business." "They started selling again to pro sports teams." "They spent their new money on new homes and their kids." "I was on welfare and eating hamburger helper everyday while they threw lavish parties serving steak with their new clients at one of their many beach side homes!"

Vera knew Bonnie was warming up and was ready to talk about the event that took place yesterday. "Bonnie, I want you to tell me what led up to yesterday." "Start with the moment you decided to go through with it."

"NO!" Bonnie screamed. "No, I'm not ready to go there yet!" Bonnie had toned her voice down some, but a lot of anger and resentment was still present.

Vera decided to go around the issue from another angle. "I want you to start by telling me what you want your father to hear." "I understand there is a lot of hate and anger towards your father." Vera pointing to herself, "It's dark in here, just think of this dark figure in front of you as your father, and tell this figure in front of you what you want him to hear from you."

Bonnie still puffing on her cigarette thought about it for a minute. She looked over to her right and then down at the ashtray. She then proceeded to put her cigarette out. She looked at Vera, the dark shadowy person that probably looked like her sitting there. "O.K." said Bonnie cheerfully. "Here goes." Then Bonnie's voiced changed. It was deeper and very angry. Bonnie pointed at Vera with her right index finger and said, "I want you to stop for a moment!" Vera was a little scared. She didn't know what she had done. She thought for a moment that she had maybe suggested the wrong type of therapy for Bonnie. Vera kept quiet and listened to Bonnie. Vera hung on to every word. Bonnie continued. "I need you to hear me!" Bonnie screamed, "Yes, I'm screaming with horrific anger!" "Hear me, but you have to listen to hear!" "While

listening to me, I want you to form a mental image of the world I live in."

"I am consumed in a world of conceptualistic form." "I am plagued with taunting images that are surreal only to me." Bonnie got up from her chair. She started pacing. The light from the blinds would run across her face showing Vera a glimpse of her. Bonnie showed anger and sadness at the same time, each time Vera would get a glimpse of Bonnie's face. Bonnie got up to Vera and got close to her face. She became angry; all Vera could think about was looking into her eyes, but still trying to hear Bonnie's words. Bonnie continued to tell her father her feelings through Vera. Bonnie talked slow with a strong glare at Vera. "These images are not of a conceptual plan that I have created." "I want you to understand what surrounds me and consumes my internal soul." Bonnie started shaking her head back and forth. She said, "It is like no world you could ever imagine."

Bonnie sat down. She looked over to the windows. Almost crying, but fighting the tears she said, "Even though you are the lone gatekeeper to this dark and gothic world I am consumed in, you will not ever understand it." "It is impossible for you to enter this level." Bonnie looked back at Vera. Vera could feel the eye contact even though it was hard to see through the dim light and smoke. Bonnie continued, "It is impossible for you to enter this level." "As long as you are unconscious, you will stay unaware of me!" "I do want you to know that I am very much of this earth!"

"What would cause you say something like that?" Vera said with a puzzled look upon her face.

"Shut up!"

Vera was taken back, but decided to let Bonnie finish; she was on a roll.

Bonnie shook her head again back and forth saying, "As well, I am VERY much so of the conscious state!" "I can see up to your level, your ego allows it." Bonnie pointed her finger at Vera, shaking it slightly saying, "At the very moment your father took his last living breath of THIS earth, you transformed." "You transformed into what I believe you always wanted to become." Bonnie put her hand down; she held her hands together with her arms

extended in front of her. "You fed your ego what it wanted and transformed it into the 'dragon'". "For years while your father was living your 'id' was caged." "Your id, the dragon, would strike out between the bars that held you back." Bonnie raised her voice again; "Your goal was to strike me down, or anyone who stood in your way!" "Until you became unleashed..." unleashed into this puissant dragon!" "You are driven like any other dragon, by greed!" "You kept me locked up in a hell so you could keep what was not yours, was never yours, and was never intended to be yours", Bonnie screamed. "While you keep me at bay, I can watch you." "I know your every move and intention." "You are unaware that I am worthy of letting go!" "I dream of being released, released into a world of pure nirvana." Bonnie held her head, then she started crying, "To be released, I have to do it myself." "For all this to correlate, you know what has to happen, yes, the dragon has to be vanquished... and I will escape." Bonnie was getting more and more upset. Her voice becoming more and more determined to fight beyond the tears and get out what had to be said. "I will be rid of you, the dragon." I have no intention of knowing you when I get out!" "I understand that I will never have what you have, mainly because I have a conscience and I'm not driven by greed!" Bonnie stood up again and leaned towards Vera pointing right at Vera and said, "I will have something you will NEVER have, that is better, and that is a peace of mind that I am honest, trustworthy, and a hard worker." "When I earned my first dollar I had done more than you had never accomplished."

Vera decided to stop Bonnie before things got out of hand. Vera said, "o.k. Bonnie, I want you to clam down, and sit down." "Breathe in slowly and out slowly." "Let's take on a different event." "I want you to tell me what led up to the event that happened yesterday." "Bonnie, tell me what made you decide to do what you did." "It must have been something that snapped?"

Bonnie took out another cigarette. She lit it and took a drag from it. Bonnie then looked down at the floor. She started rocking her upper torso. Bonnie was crying softly, and with a quiver in her voice she began to recount the events from yesterday. "I was in my bathroom in

my apartment.” “I remember sitting among the small hexagon shaped yellow tiles.” “I sat Indian style with my knees drawn up to my chest, rocking slightly to a rhythm that didn’t exist.”

Vera noticed that was the same rocking that Bonnie must have been doing as she was speaking to her. Vera wondered if Bonnie was beginning to dissociate. Bonnie was losing herself into yesterday, to relive every thought and action. Vera leaned forward as Bonnie’s voice got softer, but still firm. Bonnie had stopped crying, but the wetness around her eyes and cheeks made her face shine within the darkness of the room.

Bonnie then said, “I was peering from behind two swollen eyes, the left one barely open, crying just to keep the moisture in and around the sockets that were riddled with pain. Pain inflicted by anger and confusion.” “If only I could go home, I thought to myself... If only I could go home.” Bonnie whispered, like she was speaking to someone else besides Vera, “I want to go home.” Bonnie’s voice raised along with her head, “But I was home, what home was I referring to?” “I saw no end to the suffering.” “The reasoning had come to me, in a revelation.” Bonnie said very calmly, “I now understand why I don’t fit into these tiles.” “I am not understood or respected.” “I do not fit into their order.” “I must defy this force that wants control of me.” “If I do not have mutiny, they will consume my soul and kill it, slowly.” “I have to escape soon, for my sanity as well as for my soul to keep.” “I must have reliance on the world that is crumbling around me.” “I can never trust any of their intentions.”

“I looked down at the tiles around me and noticed the grout that surrounds the perimeter of each tile is blackened from years of neglect.” “Lines cutting across some of the tile, exposing years of pressure inflicted upon them.” “As I looked down, tears swelled up around my eyes again.” “Everything was blurry.” Bonnie held out both of her hands, palms up. She looked down at them and continued. “I tried to focus on the palms of my hands.” “I noticed my palms are riddled with scars from emotional turmoil.” “I thought to myself, my palms are full now; they can not take on another assault.” “It has to stop, now!” “I thought again, I must reprieve from this battle.” Bonnie looked up at Vera

raising her right hand and making it into a fist she started waving her fist saying very loudly, “NO, I shall not reprieve from the battle; I must relinquish this war and go home!” “I then looked at the bathroom door, realizing it leads out into the hall.” “The rite of passage, I thought to myself.” “So, I got up and walked out of the bathroom.”

Vera looked at Bonnie, trying to keep it together to keep Bonnie going. She was making progress with this patient. Vera wanted Bonnie to tell her what had happened yesterday in this first session. Vera knew the importance of gathering this information in the first session. Vera asked Bonnie, “What happened when you left the bathroom?”

Bonnie started puffing on another cigarette. She looked at the windows again and said calmly, “I got my gun.”

“And then what did you do?”

“I drove down to my father’s store,”

Bonnie said.

“What did you do when you got to your father’s store?”

Bonnie looked back at Vera; the smoke in the room was getting thicker. It was harder for Vera to see Bonnie’s face. Bonnie said, “I took the gun out and loaded it with three bullets.” “I then walked into the store.” “Walked right up to the counter where my father was standing.”

“What did you do?”

Bonnie said, “I didn’t do anything.” “He asked me what I was doing there.”

“What did you tell him?” Vera asked.

Bonnie’s voice was firm and angry again, she said, “I looked at my father straight in the face and said, ‘Everything you do creates hate within me.’” “Every act or decision you make drives the knife further into my soul.” “All my life I worked in this store while you would sleep till noon, then slither over to the bar to vegetate with the low lifers.” “While, I, your child, would work endless hours in this store.” “A few years after your father’s death, you decide to cash in on him!” “You convinced your mother to let you buy this store from her.” “No, you didn’t have cash on hand, BECAUSE YOU NEVER WORKED A DAY IN YOUR LIFE!” “If you wanted something, you stole merchandise from this very store and sold or traded them for things you wanted.” “What?”

"You didn't make enough off the insurance scams you concocted with Jerry over the years?" "Or my grandfather's guns you sold?" "I didn't see in your father's will where he left you anything!" "What made you think those guns were yours to sell?" "Or his baseball cards?" "Maybe the will said that BEFORE you changed it to KEEP ME OUT!" "When you made that deal with your mother you made it so you could work at this store and earn the money to buy her out, YOU NEVER EVEN OFFERED ME A PART OF THAT DEAL!" Bonnie screamed even louder, "YOU ARE A SELFISH BASTARD!" "No, I was out of your way!" "Wasn't I? "Instead of making me a part of something me and my grandfather worked at together, you give it all to the evil bitch, Sandy!"

"Who is Sandy?" Vera asked.

"My stepmother." Bonnie answered.

Vera said, "What did you do then?"

Bonnie got quiet, then she spoke, "I told him it's like working your entire life in a factory, then dying young from a cancer contracted from that factory." "I worked my entire childhood in that store." "I worked while you slept or bullshitted somewhere in some bar." Bonnie looked back at the windows. She said, "I began to cry." "I said to my father, 'I enjoyed every moment working, I knew I was investing my time and effort into what my grandfather told me would one day be mine!'" "I then stood there in front of him, waiting for a response." "I didn't get one."

Vera asked in a very soft voice, "What happened next?"

"I said to him, 'You have successfully killed my inner soul.'" "I then lifted the pistol slowly."

"Did you want to kill you father?"

"No, I placed the end of the cold barrel at the edge of my right temple." "I noticed the coldness of the steel that was entombed within my right hand." "I thought about my grandfather and the day we found him in his office."

Vera knew she had a breakthrough with this patient. She wanted Bonnie to feel she could trust her. Vera gave Bonnie a very concerned look, even though she had a hard time seeing Bonnie's features. Vera asked, "What did your father say to you?"

"Nothing." Bonnie said quietly with a tone of disappointment.

Bonnie got up from the chair. She stretched her arms out and then crossed them in front of her. She walked slowly with a hint of a limp towards the mirror that was behind her. She stood in front of the mirror looking into it at Vera's reflection.

At that moment Vera noticed she could only see herself in the mirror, she thought that was odd. Vera thought to herself, "Why can't I see Bonnie in that mirror?" The smoke had cleared and the noon sun was trying harder to brighten the room than the morning sun.

Bonnie slowly turned her head and part of her upper torso around towards Vera. Bonnie looked right at Vera. For the first time that day, Vera could see Bonnie's eyes now. Vera moved her head forward to get a better glance into Bonnie's eyes, and that is when Bonnie said softly, "That's when I pulled the trigger."

Your Time and Place

You are standing just outside the enormous city. Bright sunlight glints off the rows of silver towers twisting like screwthreads into the clouds. A lacework of tube passageways connects the towers with the ground. Small lavender bubbles, each encasing a person, float about the passageways. Sometimes the lavender enclosures burst and disappear when the person touches ground. You can smell the rich grass and sculptured shrubs and bushes neatly planted in the center of the city. A few smaller structures lie near the base of the central cluster of towers, low rhomboid buildings that sometimes spin on their vertical axes, sometimes float over the ground. A repeated low throb, gradually ascending in pitch, emanates from the rhomboid buildings. It soothes you. Your muscles relax as the warm breeze brushes by your face. Except for the rhomboid structures and the many rows of lofty helical towers, there is only the neatly trimmed grass and shrubbery that gently slopes downward to the distant valley.

A finger of turquoise light shoots out from a tower in the city. The beam holds steady, waist high, focused a few meters to your right. A barely audible whine begins and you remember. You step into the beam and as the whine pulses louder, weightlessness invades every muscle of your body and your vision blurs. You seem to be encased in impenetrable darkness, and your thoughts and commands float away, free from your spreading body. You remember this strange and exhilarating feeling of dematerialization as well.

You materialize within a building which you soon perceive is one of the rhomboid structures. The iris-ing viewport shows the others nearby, grouped around the central circle of towers. A few meters in front of you stand a familiar man and woman, Sart and Darla, who were in your first trigroup. For a moment their bodies shimmer, their outlines wavering like reflections in a series of distorted mirrors.

You study them as they become focused. Darla is still as you remember her, a bright-faced blonde with delicate high

cheekbones and a sharp, small nose. Her one-piece, pale blue clingsuit displays every flexing of muscle of her lithe, athletic body. Sart's black hair is drawn tightly back and knotted behind his neck. He is heavy and brawny in his red clingsuit. You remember the strength hidden in those biceps and calves which are now even more developed.

They smile at you. Darla speaks first. "Welcome, Ambassador. We are pleased to see you again." It always seems odd that her voice that you have heard in the most intimate moments says these words so stiffly, so formally.

Sart affects a more casual tone and, with a trace of a foreign accent, he immediately asks of news from their home.

"Nothing has changed. The time selection is continuing," you say. Their urgent question has been answered, but you go on to tell trivial details, small anecdotes to blunt the edge of that reply.

"Have you decided to join us then?" Sart asks when you become silent.

Darla interrupts, tactfully. "Come with us. We'll show you the city. Since you were last here there have been many marvelous advances. It is truly a paradise."

You nod and force a smile.

Once they were your most intimate, inseparable companions. Now, in this last visit, like the most recent in a series of holo replays, they are merely shadows in a vague dream. A lavender bubble appears around each of you, and in seconds you are all outside the building, soaring over the grassy slope.

Darla and Sart point out the new advances in this past golden age they have retreated to: the matter transmitters, the body regenerators, the dream holos, and so many other devices that they all blur together in your mind. As you float above the gleaming silver towers hearing their voices inside your enclosure, your attention wanders. There is absolutely nothing that interests you here. Not the magnificent city, nor the pastoral surroundings. Not the marvels of technology.

Not Darla nor Sart. This is all ephemeral, an illusion of a past you have visited far too many times, as you have visited all the other pasts of this alien planet. Nothing here will endure. No exit here. Your time and effort would be more happily spent trying to get home. But you know it's futile.

Darla has asked you a question and you ask her to repeat it. "You haven't selected this time." She says this more like an acknowledgement than a question.

"No. Not here," you answer.

"Stay with us. We would welcome you as before," she says softly.

"Yes, stay," says Sart. "Darla is right. This place is virtually a paradise. You would be happy with us here."

"No. I only came to say goodbye."

"You have selected another time?" Darla asks.

"Yes. In a sense."

"We are glad for you." Her tone becomes brighter. "We wish you much happiness there."

"Don't you ever long to be in your own time and place? To go back to where you came from and belong?" you ask them.

"This is our time and place now," she says. "We were forced to abandon the other. That time is gone. And we have come to accept this. We belong here now."

"It is such a wonderful time," adds Sart, cheerfully.

You sense the tour is nearly over, and again your mind wanders back to the place of your birth far away. The wall of ennui surrounds you and waves of nausea paralyze your body. The two voices become annoying blurs, garbled echoes of the past.

From launch point you have been sent, at your request, to the time of your arrival on the planet. All day there has been an atmosphere of suspense and deception surrounding your visit. You cannot define it except in the guilty, suspicious glances and vaguely secretive statements by the government's welcoming officials.

The government delegation has prepared this reception for you today. You are surprised at how well these people have studied your

customs and traditions, considering the vast distance between the planets.

The ambassador of this world greets you in your language and begins a conversation—his fluency is impressive—that reflects his thorough familiarity with your planet's way of life. He is a small, soft-spoken, fragile-looking man, who could easily be taken for an important official on your planet except for his thick bluish-black hair that you cannot help staring at.

Amid the assemblage of well-dressed and colorfully uniformed guests you spot a tall, gaunt man enter the reception room. He looks anxious and agitated as he whispers to a servant, glancing at you and the foreign ambassador. The servant comes over and tells the ambassador about the man. The ambassador, slightly irritated, apologizes to you for the interruption and strides to the tall man who remains by the entrance. A few hushed words are exchanged. The tall man leaves and the ambassador comes back to you.

"I'm sorry to tell you that you cannot . . ." He hesitates. His voice drops almost to a whisper as he continues. "Confirmed reports have indicated that within a very short time our sun will nova. Evacuations of important officials have already secretly begun with the time selector—which of course you are welcome to use. Your world was informed of this and has just sent word that due to the length of time to reach us there would be no point in sending ships here."

"I'm very sorry," he says with a shrug.

You say nothing, having heard this speech hundreds of times before, like some grotesque, worn-out, grim joke.

In the floater, you drift over the blackened, gnarled landscape, safe behind the craft's radiation shields. To the horizon stretches a layer of black and gray rubble, mostly pieces of buildings—perhaps. It is difficult to recognize familiar forms. There is not a tree or bush or any living thing in sight. The wind stirs a jagged pile of the ruins which falls and crumbles further. There is no other movement as far as you can see along the debris-strewn plain. The mottled surface is like a random collection of junk, some bits charred, other

partially melted and spread over the wasteland. Even the air is black with ashes. Here lies the death of the golden age. Millenia ago you visited the fabulous city. Now Sart and Darla are somewhere among the ruins here, along with every other member of their city. All transient, all ephemeral. You have memorized the nuances of every protrusion of this landscape, as if it were some profoundly disturbing artistic masterpiece.

You are again in the room with the officer in charge of time selection. He is surprised to see you. "Ambassador, you still have not selected?" he asks, upset and agitated.

"No," you answer with indifference.

"Not any of the times you have visited?"

"No," you repeat.

He falters, temporarily unable to cope with your blunt opposition. Despite the fact that you are an alien, he respects your position of power and rank, and his superiors have no doubt instructed him to respect your wishes as well. "I really can't understand it. You have visited

nearly all the available selection points, many of them quite a number of times. You realize, of course, that legally you cannot hope to continue this delay. There are many others waiting to make final selection. Temporary selection points are already being destroyed. And soon only final selections will be possible. Is there perhaps something we have overlooked which is preventing you from making final selection? You are not afraid of making the choice? We can help you overcome any fear you may have about this routine selection process."

"That isn't the problem," you say, considering his implication of cowardice. "I've just seen everything—too many times. There is only one remaining time I care to visit for final selection."

"So you have finally found your time and place? And what selection point is that?"

"I choose not to be transported to a selection point."

His eyebrows arch as he gapes at you.

"But our sun will soon nova," he bursts out.

"You will die!"

"Exactly," you say, tonelessly.

How Not To Write a Haiku: A Haibun

The rain quit, but left a gray dampness in the air. I stood on my front steps and took in the view as I removed a cigarette from my pack. Pulling a lighter out of my pocket, I noticed that the storm had prized the few remaining leaves from their branches. Mother Nature had undone her work of the previous two seasons. I cupped my hand around the small flame, shielding it from the wind. As I took a drag, I realized that the leaves had completely covered the driveways to my left, my neighbors' and mine.

I laughed at my own naïveté. Since I am only renting the house, is it actually my driveway? The neighbors own their house, but the strip of pavement beside me was only borrowed, for a fee. Here I was, referring to everything in this small rectangle as mine, when I was paying someone else for the right to live there. I thought of the elderly couple living beside me. They didn't have to pay rent; therefore they own the house and the surrounding land. It all makes perfect sense, unless you think about it.

I looked down and saw that Mother Nature must have felt the same way I did, for she had made sure that the leaves covered the thin strip of grass between the two driveways that formed the boundary line between the two properties. Now it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. Nothing stood between my neighbors' yard and my own but a thin layer of leaves and a polite delusion.

Reveling in my newfound anarchism, I noticed the haiku happen, but just barely. (Despite what you have been taught, haiku are not written: they just happen. It is the poet's task to record them accurately.) Snuffing out my cigarette, I stumbled inside. Finding a pen and paper, I wrote

Fallen leaves on ground,
from my neighbors' house to mine;
blurring all boundaries.

I laid the pen down. I read what I had written and realized that Basho would not be proud. I couldn't quite put my finger on what

was wrong with it, though. I read it twice more before I saw it. Mine. Me. I. The cardinal sin of haiku is to mention yourself. Only the great Masters can be forgiven of it. I was no great Master; I wasn't even dead, one of the pre-requisites to being a great Master.

Picking up the pen, I set out to right my wrong, and sketched

Leaves lying on ground,
Houses in a sea of brown;
No lines between them.

I didn't even set the pen down for this triplet. The rhyme dominated it, drawing attention from the truth behind it.

Endless sea of leaves
Completely sounds houses-
No lines between them.

was my next effort. I looked out the window to check myself. Although the leaves did cover everything from the front door to the road, these thirty feet from the house to the road could hardly be called endless. Haiku call for simple, objective truth.

The reason that I was so anxious about these few syllables is that it was an assignment. The next day I was to turn in a haiku for a class. At the time it was assigned I didn't think much of it. After all, I had "written" many a haiku. However, between the time the assignment was given and now, the opportunity hadn't presented itself. Or rather, I hadn't noticed it. I couldn't just make one up. A rule of haiku is that it must be a true recording of an actual event. (Or non-event, rather. Haiku are the still-lives of the poetry world.)

Another effort left me with

Barren branches above,
Houses stand among dead leaves-
Property lines erased.

This iteration sat a little better, but lacked something. I wasn't just that I couldn't

see where “my” yard ended and “theirs” began. There was something on a larger scale. Our lives, as well as our lawns, are connected. Not just mine and my neighbors’, but everyone’s. We all belong to a larger group, the so-called “Human race,” and should treat one another accordingly; with love and kindness.

I smiled as I realized a few things: as well as an anarchist, I was becoming a mystic; I had just experienced a satori in “my” front yard; and nicotine apparently has a very marijuana-like effect on me.

Barren branches,
Houses among fallen leaves—
No lines between.

Perfect. Basho would be proud. But would Dr. Francavilla?

The good Doctor is the professor who assigned the ‘ku to me. (After a year of writing haiku, you are granted the privilege to refer to them in this abbreviated form.) I’d been involved with haiku for quite some time, and became somewhat of a bigot as a result. We, the haiku bigots, disagree with the 5-7-5 structure of haiku, seeing it as a cumbersome convention. Furthermore, we regard anyone who insists writing them in this form as an Unenlightened Fool. However, I’m not sure how my professor feels about it. Despite the possibility of facing Basho’s wrath, I added a few words.

Barren branches above
Houses stand among dead leaves—
No lines between them.

After reading them, however, I decided that being an Unenlightened Fool wasn’t so bad.

The Green World

My energy is neon blue.

It hasn't always been, I suppose when we first met I gave off a blinding white glow. As I walked down the crowded lemon fresh hallways of my college, white seeped from my pores; it would drip down my forehead stinging my eyes. People would stop and stare into my white light and sometimes, they would exploit this light for their own devious purposes. What caused this dramatic change was fate. Fate walked into a classroom when I was 17 years old and fate kindly dealt me an accomplice, and fate saw that it was good because all angry young men must have an accomplice. This fate was called music and, music is a binding force. It can take two total strangers and create a bond so strong it's impenetrable to anyone on the outside... There's them and then there is us, it has always been this way and so it shall remain.

I seem to have been staring at clocks all day. Watching them carry out their mundane lives, tick tocking away and never actually getting anywhere. For two years now I've worked part-time in a mental hospital, tending to the sick and needy, just doing my bit for the good of all mankind while I study at Uni. I work mostly with the elderly, Alzheimer's patients and all that stuff that gets swept under the carpet denying to ourselves that we are not immortal and there will always be a tomorrow. The nurse in charge has been watching me all shift, all too aware of my vacancy. He looks up at me from his office. He's writing his notes on how best to care for these people. At the end of the shift he waddles up to me, his big red turkey head bobbing from side to side, inspecting. "Good shift today, young man" he clucks. The bright red fat on his chin, swings from side to side with every motion of his beak. "Yes boss, it certainly was" I reply. "All those incontinence pads, changed then?" those filthy middle aged eyes of his that have been ogling the student nurses all day, roll around in those filthy pink sockets. Like the good pigeon I'm meant to be I suck in my stomach, puff out my chest and coo, "Yes Sir, all the pads are changed as you requested... Sir". "Good" he says. "You may leave."

As I get in from work one of my flat mates, Brandon, lies on the couch holding between his yellow fingers a lit cigarette. Brandon's a few years older than me, we met through a friend of a friend a couple of years back. Unemployed he spends his time philosophizing in front of the T.V. set with a guitar on his lap. He senses my excitement as I bounce through the door and scowls with disapproval. "I don't know why you bother old boy, all this clubbing nonsense. A bunch of ignoramus' sweating, drinking, fighting." He lay there with his comfort blanket wrapped around his legs, a warm cup of tea by his side and a copy of "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" laying open on the floor. "You're above all this old boy, come sit, we'll share our animosity and perhaps from it great things shall stem." I smile back at him shaking my head.

"I'd love too, but I really haven't the time right now, I've gotta get ready." I hurtle past him and head for the fridge, pulling out a beer and taking my first swig for the evening. I glance up at the clock 6:30pm. "Is Alex in?" I shout from the bathroom turning on the shower.

"He should be in soon old boy, said he had some things to do at University today." I run into my bedroom, turn on the stereo and pick out some CD's to get me in the mood.

"Come on old sport, there's a wildlife documentary on that I want to watch, turn that down please".

"What?" I shout grinning.

"Turn it down old boy?" his voice squeaking with his feeble rage.

"What?" I reply.

"Oh forget it old boy, play that game if you want, but that's bad sport".

Shower, swig, splash on the eau de toilet, swig, pull on the glad rags, swig, and well that's me ready for the evening. As I'm polishing the loafers Alex hurtles through the door and runs straight into his room, runs back out with a towel, runs in the bathroom, runs out the bathroom dripping all over the carpet and heads straight back for his room.

"Welcome home old boy". Brandon shouts from his position on the couch. So nice of you

to drop by.” Alex and I are old friends from college. Both products of working class North East England and part of that small minority that makes it to University from the Comprehensive Schools of Northern England. He hurtles out of his room and comes face to face with me in the hallway. “Ready?” the corner of his mouth lifting into a smile. I nod back at him, “Well lets go, what are you waiting for”. We hurtle out of the door and I catch Brandon muttering something about how great the 1960’s were. As we walk down the busy streets together Alex skips ahead in front, his nose held high in the air as if he can smell the neon blue energy forming in the skies overhead. His arms flail widely above him as he hops on one foot, spinning round and round to an invisible beat. “Yeah, we’re alive, you know that? Do you *really* know that?”

A traditional Northern fishing pub is the first port of call for us land lubbers and I swear to you as we burst through those rotten wooden doors, hanging from their rusted hinges, the entire pub goes silent. I mean its like some seen from a western, a bunch of fisherman in dirty gut ridden overhauls playing cards, stop what they’re doing, put down their pints and stare straight at us. The piano player in the corner sliding those chubby, dirty little digits over the ebony and ivory stops playing a song about a dance my grandparents used to do back in the day. We’re Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, we’re the biggest threat to walk in these doors in 30 years, and oh man do we know it. We tip an invisible cap at some muttering old fool and strut in their like a couple of fugitives. The bar maid, a heavily made up women of about fifty licks her lips as we approach the bar. “What can I do for you boys”? I slam down a crisp five-pound note and slide it across the bar to her. “Well ma’am we could sure do with a couple of those whisky’s you got over there”. As she takes the cash her long red fingernails slide down my hand and she turns with a flick of her cheap dress and a bob of her peroxide damaged hair. She places the whiskies on the bar and as she does so Alex blows her a little kiss. “Thank you ma’am.” The fisherman are still watching all this and boy are they ready to erupt. Their little red eyes squint at us as we walk by, for thirty years they’ve been drinking

in this pub, getting plastered and trying it on with that old barmaid and here come a couple of young pups wet behind the ears and move in on good old Dirty Maggie May. Well they ain’t having any of that. “Hey, you two, this isn’t a playground. What do you want in here?” I sweep my hand down in front of me and bow before my humble audience like an Elizabethan gentleman. “I beg your pardon sir, my friend and I were just having a couple of drinks, minding our own business and all”. Another old dog of the sea jumps up from his seat and spills his pint all the way down the front of his dirty overhauls. “I don’t like the tone of your voice boy. I was out on them seas before you was born.” I smile back at him, “I’m sure you were Sir, give my regards to Samuel Taylor Coleridge next time you see him won’t you”. With that we down our shots of whisky, blow a big kiss to the barmaid and ride on out of there.

We head to a nearby bar, more suitable to people of our disposition and walk in. The DJ’s laying down a couple of pop songs, pure cheese but the punters in these types of places love it. We buy ourselves a couple of drinks and sit down at the bar. In places like this you get the most diverse groups of people. You’ve got the girls of sixteen in one corner, told their parents they’re staying at a friends house, slipped a dress and some cheap make-up into their handbag’s and headed out in this big wide world I call home. To your left we have my personal favorite. The middle aged bloke, supermarket purchased shirt tucked into those fake jeans he bought off his mate, beer belly hanging over the lot and dancing on his own in the middle of an empty floor. This guy’s been out all day and he’s smashed, probably been to watch the local team get whipped at soccer and just hit the bottle big time. As the young girls sit in the corner drinking their fruity cocktails from a big long straw, fighting their way through a jungle of pink and blue umbrellas, he swings those chubby hips in their direction. If only your wife could see you now sunshine.

Its getting closer now, I know it, Alex knows it, it won’t be long before we leave this bunch of misfits, clowns and has beens and really start the evenings odyssey.

Alex turns to me as we sit in the corner of the bar and nods his head in the direction of the

drunken, overweight John Travolta. "Is that what we're going to look like in 20 years time? I mean is that all we've got to look forward to? Becoming all that we sit here and mock." I shrug my shoulders at him and take another sip of my drink.

"Yeah probably. You see Alex that's the final kick in the teeth. One morning you wake up, slip on those comfortable slippers on and then baamm, its then you realize." "Realize what?" he replies, looking like a child who just found out Santa isn't real.

"Its then you realize that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. You ready for another pint yet?"

Ladies and Gentleman the formalities are over, the scenes been set and the characters are introduced. The hallowed ground looms high above us. Gargoyles hang from their stone perches warding off the week, this is *our* time and this *our* place of refuge. The setting is an old Georgian theatre converted to a club called "The Empire". The lost children like refugees line up outside the doors hoping to find themselves for a few precious hours within these walls. The lost children huddle up close to each other in the queue to get in, hoping to find warmth from the bodies that surround them. An icy cloud forms from every word that they utter, inside it is warm and the warmth is what they long for. It always pays to know someone at the front of this mass and its not long before Alex and I have talked our way to the front of the line. All that's standing between paradise and us is 350lb's of heaving brutality, namely "the bouncer". We hand over our ticket and we're in. As we walk through the large wooden doors the heat of three thousand sweating bodies strikes me. It settles on my cold skin, forming a coating like powdered sugar upon my face. The music blasting from enormous speakers by the D.J. booth surrounds us, encompassing our bodies and dominating all our senses. Alex motions me to check the place out and we skip through the hot bodies until we reach the upper circle of the theatre. As I climb the stairs to the next level I can feel the neon blue energy forming in the top of my head. Each step I take, I feel it. I feel the neon blue energy slide down the back of my neck until it finally settles, its warm hands sliding over my shoulders. We climb into the

royal box of the theatre. Below us is the theatre's stage converted into a dance floor where the masses have converged to celebrate the moment, their hands raised to the ceiling in praise of the night. I raise my hands to the ceiling to join them and baamm, neon blue shoots down my spine, it shoots down my arms to the fingertips, every vein in my body is radiating, throbbing as the music takes me in its arms. The light bursts from my fingertips, shooting in a thousand directions like a laser show. I turn to Alex and he's just standing there with the biggest grin humanly possible on his face, his hands resting behind his head, his body bouncing in time with the bass drum. He feels it too. He turns to me and shouts above the music, "Now, you know you're alive. You're *really* alive".

Alex jumps up onto the thin ledge of the upper circle and begins to dance, there's nothing below him but a fifty-foot drop and three thousand people packed onto a bouncing dance floor. "Come on". He shouts. "Get yourself up here and we'll skydive".

I climb up onto the thin ledge and as soon as I get my balance I feel a great big hand grab me by the scruff of my neck and almost push me over the edge to what would be a very painful accident. The hand pulls me down off of the ledge and spins me around. What stands before me now is the "bouncer". His hand shoots to my throat; it squeezes tightly around me, almost cutting off my breath. "Do you want to die?" He shouts. His face turning bright red, the veins in his neck bulge with raw fury. "Do you want to die?" He screams again. His grip loosens and he struts off grunting like an ape, his knuckles scraping against the floor. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the missing link. Alex jumps down from the ledge and comes running over to me. "You alright?" he says. "Yeah, I think so. It is kind of ironic though that he nearly killed me, trying to save me."

At the back of the club is a staircase, it's cool, it's quiet and this is where we head for. A number of people have converged here to chill and they lay strewn across the floor in every direction. We sit down amongst them with our backs against the cold wall.

"What's the point in that? Why can't they just politely say, "Excuse me young man? Would

you kindly mind climbing down from up there. It's dangerous and you could get hurt if you fall. Have a nice day."

I shrug my shoulders, "I don't know, mate."

"Who are these people who they get to work in here? They're just thugs, mindless bloody thugs. I bet that it actually says on the job description 'Must be available to work weekends. Must have a keen attitude and enjoy kicking shit out of anyone who looks like they're having a good time.'"

The music louden's as a guy bursts through the door and falls down next to me. The sweat drips from his forehead, his chest heaves up and down.

I turn to him, "You all right there, mate."

His bright red cheeks give way to a smile.

"Yeah, just need to chill out for a bit. Ere, I've been discussing it with my mates earlier on and now I'm gonna see what you think."

"What?" Alex says.

"In your opinion, what are...what are the benefits of a fitted kitchen? You know what I mean? Why would you pay the extra for getting someone to come and fit this dream kitchen for you?"

Alex and I look at each other for a second and then burst out into fits of giggles.

"The guy starts to look upset and interrupts us, 'No...no, seriously, why?'"

I try and stop laughing to answer his question but my mouth keeps folding up at the corners.

"Well, I suppose..." I lay my index finger upon my cheek and stare into open space. "Well, say you're not very good at stuff like that someone else can come in and do it for you. You might be brilliant at trigonometry, read 'War and Peace' five times, but when it comes to sliding pole A into slot B, well that's where the problem lies."

The guy sits mimicking me with his finger on his chin, vacantly contemplating this groundbreaking new theory. He nods his head a few times. "Yeah, yeah, you know you're right. Thank you. Thank you so much." With that he jumps up from the comfort of the floor and runs to go tell his mates.

"Hmmm..." my finger still on my chin. "Here, there's a party on the other side of town. Some girl's parents are away for the weekend got that guy 'Mouse's' decks too. You up for that?"

Alex nods his head still giggling, "Yeah, well I, lets go."

We dart down the back of the steps, through the front door of the club and hop into a taxi.

The taxi driver asks us where we want to go.

The crumbs that have gathered around his chubby cheeks over the shift fall off with every motion of his chin. We tell him our destination and hey, ho, away we go.

We pull up at the house. The music thumps from inside its small shell. The house is located quite near to a beach where you can here people shouting and splashing in the freezing water.

The music is deafening as we walk through the front door and into the back kitchen to try and pinch some drinks. Cool as cucumbers we slide past the crowd and pull a couple of cold lagers from the fridge. There are at least one hundred people in the small house, even fitted kitchen guy's here. He lies just like a starfish, passed out in the middle of the makeshift dance floor.

"Do you wanna go for a walk?" Alex says.

"We just got here, man." I say shaking my head.

"Come on, its gonna be cold though so lets pinch some hats and coats." He nods in the direction of the stairs and we bolt up them heading for the parents bedroom. We peep our head around the side of the door, just to make sure the coast is clear and creep in turning on the light. A large oak, wardrobe stands at one end of the room and we tiptoe towards our unsuspecting prey. Inside the wardrobe hangs mother's Sunday best. A selection of simply delightful fur coats and hats that is sure to keep winter's chill away. Alex pull's one off its coat hanger and tries it on. "Yes..." he says as slides in his arms. "This is definitely me."

"No" I say grabbing a large brown mink coat.

"That is soooo last season. Don't you read Cosmopolitan?"

Alex reaches us to the top of the wardrobe and pulls down a number of brightly coloured hat boxes. "We need hats, m'boy. No ensemble is complete without a hat."

Wearing our fur coats and pink Sunday best hats we crouch in the dark at the top of the staircase. The front door stands open. A crowd of people stand chatting but the exit is clear. "You ready?" I say, tilting my hat. "On 3 we sprint for the door. 1...2..." Alex chews his bottom

lip, focused only on my words and the light at the end of the tunnel... "3".

Half running, half falling, we shoot down the staircase, shouting and hollering at the tops of our voices. We run straight out of the door and out onto the street. Once we're safely out of harm's way, we stop and stand with our hands on our knees panting for breath. "Now what?" I say.

Alex shrugs his shoulders. "How about some gardening?"

"Gardening? Are you out of your mind? Why do you want to do gardening?"

"Well..." Alex says. "What do normal, respectable people do on a Sunday?"

"It isn't Sunday." I say.

"Yeah I know. But...for the benefit of this little mission, let us pretend that it is Sunday. We're already dressed in the suitable attire." He stands with his arms out folded and performs a twirl.

"Alex, we're wearing fur coats and pink hats belonging to some girl's mother."

"Exactly, suitable attire. On a Sunday, one puts on one's Sunday best. Then one will relax whilst one does one's gardening."

"Ahhhh..." I say nodding. "One does, doesn't one. We don't have a garden."

"That is true, but look around you. Everybody else does. Imagine their precious little faces when they wake up tomorrow morning to find that their boring, little gardens have been transformed over night. We'll be like the Robin Hood's of the gardening world. No, wait, we're like the Father Christmas's of the gardening world. You see?"

"Yes, actually I am beginning to see. We'll be heroes, it'll be all over tomorrow's papers. I

can see it now. 'Town pair work horticultural miracles whilst world sleeps.' Where do we start?"

After about an hour of flexing our green finger we successfully or almost successfully (we trampled on a few flowers by accident here and there) managed to transfer most of the flowers from No. 36 into the garden of No. 35 and vice-versa. Caked in mud from head to toe, with a flower in our hats as a souvenir, we stood back and admired our loving work.

"We should really think about returning these coats now. You know." I said, picking a large clump of mud from the mink.

"Yeah, you're right." We jump to our feet and head back to the party.

We hang our coats and hats on the bannister and walk in to the front room. Most of the crowd has dispersed now and gone home or wherever they sleep. All that's left of the party is a few mumbling shadows. The neon blue energy that fed their fury, flickers like a light bulb ready to burn out. Their eyes have faded from the radiant, luminous neon to grey. A cloud hangs above their heads. They know its there for them and it scares them. The owner of the house, a young girl of maybe nineteen lies crying in the arms of her best friend. They prey for sleep and release.

Alex and I turn without saying a word to each other and leave. The parties over.

We take off our shoes and walk down to the beach. We sit in the wet sand, the waves washing against our feet. The neon blue is fading in us now too. Neither of us can speak. We just sit there in the sand and watch the bright orange sun rise from the ocean.

The Impossible Journey

I was barely 24 when NASA chose me to be a part of the deepest human space travel ever attempted. The mission was to go to Neptune and back, while collecting crust samples and taking photos of each planet along the way. It would take more than a year-and-a-half and my name would become a permanent part of history.

I was among the top 5 percent of the 2021 Air Force Academy graduating class and I immediately began flying in the Space Program as a test pilot. In January of '22, I was accepted into the 6-month training program at Cape Kennedy, where my mind and body were pushed further than I would have ever imagined possible. Somehow I made it – eleven of us did. Throughout our training, we'd heard rumors about the impossible journey -- that summer the rumors were proven true. In June of '22, NASA made the official announcement at an international press conference in Washington. The launch date was set for Monday, February 5th, 2023.

NASA officials also made their crew selection. Three of the eleven young astronauts were chosen, along with three well-known veterans of space travel: Michelle Grace, Chris Fontaine, and myself of the former group and Colonel Marsha Hampton, Colonel Jewell Lott, and Major Chad Evans of the latter. We made several trips to the Earth's moon and during these trips we would act out every training scenario in the book. Colonel Lott was the pilot and I was the co-pilot. I memorized her movements and studied every detail of the shuttle. Colonel Hampton and Chris were in charge of mapping and navigation. Major Evans was the flight surgeon and also acted as the shuttle botanist. Michelle was the shuttle technician and communications officer. We were under intense pressure – extensive training, interviews with the press, meetings with politicians, but we were ready – at least we thought we were.

My stomach was in knots that morning. The 6 a.m. blast-off was familiarly unstable. The boosters separated and we left Earth's atmosphere. After one complete orbit, we broke

free of Earth's gravitational pull and we were on our way to Mars.

Colonel Lott cued in over the radio, "Base, this is Journey One. We're gonna engage the shuttle engines -- headin' to Big Red."

"Roger that, Journey One. Have a safe trip. We'll talk to you soon."

"Is everybody secure?"

"Check," we all chimed.

"Coordinates set, Marsh?"

Colonel Hampton nodded. "We're locked in, Judy"

"Once we get moving, you'll be free to move about. Fire us up, Dan."

"Yes, ma'am," I answered.

The engines ignited with a roar and we were on our way. The trip to Mars took nearly 15 days. Major Evans, Chris, and myself guided the module to the surface of Mars. It was the only planet we were able to walk on. Our suits couldn't handle the cold of the other planets, so we would send robotic rovers in returnable pods to their surfaces. Chris photographed the terrain and I recorded personal descriptions, while Major Evans studied the atmosphere and analyzed the surface. We were instructed to gather large rock samples so we used thermal demolition to break up various rock formations. Major Evans selected the best samples and we loaded them into the module. We also visited the "Mars Lab" that was constructed 8 years earlier by Russian cosmonauts. The lab was severely damaged by heavy winds and sandstorms, but its stock of fuel cells remained intact. We collected as many as the module could carry. We found no signs of life nor would any life -- that we know of -- be sustainable on Mars. We spent 19 hours on the surface and then successfully linked up with the shuttle. Everything was going according to schedule and we were on our way to Jupiter.

As we expected, Jupiter showed no signs of life and had an average surface temperature of 150 degrees Celsius below zero. One planet after another, we sent robots and collected samples. It became a tedious routine and time away from Earth was taking its toll on our psyches. A total of 14 months had passed as

we left our orbit of Uranus -- only Neptune was left. We couldn't wait to get home. Michelle, the youngest of our crew, was very homesick. She would cry herself to sleep and have screaming fits of rage. She had just about given up. I understood how she felt, but starting out on our last leg of the trip, our spirits were rejuvenated. A world of people anxiously awaited our return.

We were all in the cockpit when it happened.

As we approached Neptune, a sudden, blinding flash of light filled the cabin. Instinctively, I closed my eyes, threw up my arms, and lunged to the floor. There was no explosion, no noise, but I remember hearing the yells of the other crewmembers. The next thing I remembered was the others standing around me. Everyone had lost consciousness, but I was the last one to come to. A glowing blue light was shining in through the windows and it lit up the interior of the cabin.

They stood me up and Colonel Lott asked, "Are you okay, Dan?"

My head was throbbing. "I think so. I can't see too well," I muttered. "What happened?"

"I don't know," she said as she walked to her seat. "Chris, help Dan to his chair. Everyone, get to your positions! We're gettin' outta here."

Colonel Lott tried the controls again and again. "I'm not getting any response from the engines. Michelle, how's our power?"

Michelle looked down at her screen. "Everything's looking good, ma'am -- fuel cells are at eighty percent."

Suddenly, the overhead monitor turned on. There was no clear picture -- just static and a low hum. A scratchy voice came through the speaker. "We are aliens to your solar system."

I couldn't move. I don't even think I was breathing. I wondered if I was dreaming. I looked around the cabin at the others. Could this be real?

We sat there speechless as the voice continued. "We have studied the cultures of your planet from afar for thousands of years, but we have never made contact. Now *you* have come to *us*." The low humming noise continued to buzz through the speaker.

"What do you want?!" yelled Colonel Lott.

"Do not be alarmed. You will be spared... *if* you do as we say."

Colonel Lott's military training took over. "We are members of the United States Air and Space Alliance and we are not authorized to make any concessions."

"You do not understand," the voice reprimanded. "We do not need your compliance. You will do as we say or you will be destroyed."

"What is it that you want from us?" inquired Major Evans.

"No more questions!" boomed the voice of the alien. "In exactly three Earth hours, your planet will be destroyed. Your group will be the only survivors. We will examine your minds and your bodies and use you as our slaves."

"For God's sake -- Why?!" yelled Colonel Hampton.

"We do not know of your God. We only know that you have been allowed to butcher your planet for too long. Your kind has destroyed your planet's resources, your race is infested with famine and disease, and you are creatures that do not deserve to live!"

The monitor turned off and there was silence.

"What are we going to do?!" screamed Michelle. "They're going to torture us -- use us as guinea pigs!"

"Take it easy, Michelle! Chris, are you able to contact Earth?" I asked.

"No! I'm transmitting, but I'm not getting a response."

I turned in my chair. "Colonel Hampton, do you think you can pinpoint the source of this force field?"

The colonel shook her head. "I don't know, Dan. Give me just a minute."

"We don't have a minute, ma'am!"

Colonel Lott interrupted. "What are you getting at, Dan?"

"If we can pinpoint the source, maybe we can stop them."

"But how?! Our engines aren't working. We can't move," said Chris.

"I don't know," I said. "But we've got less than three hours to figure something out or we're all dead."

My mind was racing. I lost track of time. My head filled with random images of my life – of home. I kept thinking, “This has to be a nightmare. Am I alive? Is this really happening? Earth *destroyed*? What about my fiancée... and my parents... and the *entire* human race? I’ve got to do something. But what?”

“Dan! Dan, are you all right?” yelled Colonel Hampton.

“Y- yes, ma’am,” I stuttered. “I’m fine,” I said, shaking off my thoughts. I walked over to her station.

“I’ve located the source. I monitored the energy waves around us and extremely high levels of power seem to be coming from this asteroid orbiting Neptune. It’s over one-and-a-half kilometers in diameter.” Her monitor displayed a diagram of Neptune with a small blip coming from the center of the screen.

“Are you sure that’s the source?”

“It’s the only possibility I can come up with. The energy source is not coming from the planet’s surface. There’s one other thing...” She paused. “We’re being pulled directly toward the asteroid.”

My head dropped. “How long until we reach it?”

“One hour and forty-nine minutes.”

“They’re bringing us in,” I said, “And the time is running exactly in synch with their countdown to destroy Earth. We don’t have much time.” I turned back toward the others. “Michelle, can you program one of the rover pods to collide with that asteroid?”

“Well... yeah, I think I can do that. I could over-shoot the landing coordinates and run the pod right into it,” she answered.

“What good will that do, Dan?” asked Colonel Lott. “You heard Marsha – that asteroid is almost a mile wide!”

“We can use the detonators. We’ll load one of the pods with as many detonators as it can hold and shoot it into the asteroid.”

“That’s crazy!” Major Evans argued. “Those detonators don’t have enough force to take out something that big. And besides, what if they see it coming?”

“You got a better idea, Sir? Chris, seal off the front of the shuttle. Let’s see if we can

get those bay doors open. Michelle, you and Colonel Hampton get one of the pods ready.”

“Do you think it’ll work, Dan?” asked Colonel Lott.

“I don’t know, ma’am. But it’s the only choice we’ve got. You and Major Evans stay up here and radio us if anything else happens. We’ll get to work.”

Chris and I went to the rear of the storage area to open the bay doors, but the controls wouldn’t work. “What’s the problem?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Chris. “We’ve got power, but the doors won’t budge.”

“Is there any other way to get those doors open? We’ve got to get one of those pods out.”

“There are manual cranks – one for each door – but it’ll take us hours to get them open.”

“We don’t have hours. We’ve got less than one. We only need them open far enough for one pod. Let’s get started.” Chris and I got on each side of the storage area and began turning the cranks furiously. Only a few minutes went by and I began to tire. “Is it working?”

Chris checked the windows into the bay. “Yeah... yeah, it’s working!”

“Good! Keep turning!”

Several minutes later Colonel Hampton and Michelle walked up with the rover pod. “She’s filled up, Dan! Ready to go!” Michelle yelled.

“Good. That’s good enough, Chris. You can stop cranking. We’ve got the doors open wide enough now. Let’s get her into the bay.” We charged the detonators and loaded the pod into the shuttle bay. I called over my radio, “How much time, Colonel Lott?”

“Forty-one minutes,” she radioed back.

“Let’s get back to the cockpit,” I said.

“We’d better pray this works.”

We ran back to the front of the shuttle where Michelle controlled the pod and sent it out of the bay. We watched in silence as it shot past the front windows.

“How long before the pod collides?” asked Colonel Lott.

“Twenty seconds,” Colonel Hampton answered.

"Dan, get on your controls. Be ready to get us outta here. Everyone get secured!"

I felt my heart sink deep into my stomach. "This has got to work," I thought.

"Ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two... one... impact."

BOOM!!

The pod exploded against the asteroid! Debris flew in all directions. The shuttle rattled and jerked, throwing us around in our seats. The blue tractor beam that surrounded us began to dim and flicker. I tried the controls. "I still can't get a response from the boosters! I don't understand!" The explosion subsided and there was silence. The blue light was still shining into the cockpit.

Colonel Hampton spoke up, "The asteroid is still there. Their energy levels have dropped fifty percent, but they've still got us!"

The overhead monitor flashed on. "YOU FOOLS! You think you can stop us?! Now your commander will pay with her life!"

Colonel Lott stood up and turned toward us. She grabbed her throat and her tongue was forced out. She couldn't breathe! Her eyes opened wide and she walked toward me. She was choking and gasping for air. I jumped up and she fell into my arms.

"Lay her down!" yelled Major Evans. He ran over to help. He tried to clear her throat with his finger and I could see her eyes filling with blood. We were all kneeling around trying to keep her calm – wanting to help, but it was too late. She quit struggling and her arms fell limp. "She's dead," Major Evans said with a dazed stare.

"YOU BASTARDS!!!" screamed Michelle as she threw her fists in the air.

The monitor clicked off.

I tried to restrain Michelle. She was bawling and moaning – swinging her arms about. "LEAVE ME ALONE!" she screamed. "This is all your fault! You said it would work. You said it would work!" She ran toward the sleeping quarters. I turned toward the cockpit windows, looking out at the half demolished asteroid that was growing ever closer.

"Chris," said Major Evans, "Help me get Judy to the rear." Chris and the Major lifted Colonel Lott's limp body and carried her off.

I sat there with my head in my hands. "What had I done?" I thought. "Was I too quick to act? What alternatives did I have?"

Colonel Hampton broke the silence.

"Dan, we're moving faster toward the asteroid."

"What?"

"At the rate we're going now, we'll reach the asteroid in twenty-two minutes."

"Oh, my God." I stared at his monitor.

Major Evans and Chris walked back into the cockpit. "What? What is it?" Chris demanded.

"We've got less than twenty-two minutes before we reach the asteroid," answered Colonel Hampton. Chris dropped into his seat.

All I could think about was my family and the crew. I had to save them. "Chris, how many fuel cells do we need to make it home?" I asked.

He looked up at me, "Why?"

"Don't ask me why, just answer the question."

"We need at least five to make the trip, but our capacity is ten."

"How many are installed right now?"

"There are eight fully charged cells installed, and we have seven more in storage."

"Fill the two empty slots and meet us in storage. Hurry, Chris! We don't have much time!" Chris ran off. "Colonel Hampton, do we have any detonators left?"

"Yes – there's one left."

"Good. Get Michelle and the detonator and go to the storage area. We've got to get the module loaded."

Major Evans and I ran out of the cockpit and headed for the storage area.

"What are we doing, Dan?"

"We gonna load that module with fuel cells and use the detonator to set them off. Then we'll send it into that alien asteroid."

"The module is manually controlled. That thing won't fly itself into the asteroid."

We reached the storage area where Chris, Michelle, and Colonel Hampton were already waiting. "Major, help me with my suit."

"Dan, what are you doing?" asked Chris.

"I'm gonna fly the module into the asteroid."

"That's suicide, Dan!"

"It's the only choice we've got left. We can't just stand by and do nothing. Those aliens are going to destroy Earth!"

"I won't let you do it," said Chris.

"I *want* to do this! Colonel Lott can't have died in vain. It's the only choice we have. Just help me, Chris. Don't keep me from doing this. There's a lot more at stake than just one life."

Chris looked at the others and Colonel Hampton gave him a nod.

"Help the others get the cells loaded into the module," I said

Chris, Michelle and Colonel Hampton loaded the module, while Major Evans finished helping me with my suit. I walked over to the module and climbed in. "Is the detonator set?"

"Yes," answered Colonel Hampton. Michelle had tears rolling down her cheeks.

"You guys get those bay doors open wider so I can make it out. Have a safe journey home," I said. Then I sealed the hatch.

They loaded the module into the bay and I fired up the engines. I lifted out of the shuttle and I could see the alien ship clearly. I maneuvered the module in the direction of the aliens and hit the main booster. The engines roared and I flew faster toward the aliens. I was reaching nearly five thousand miles per hour. I got closer and closer – I could see the surface of the ship and I could tell that it was not an asteroid at all. Everything was moving in slow motion now. Intricately meshed cables and wire covered the exterior and I could see small lights shining through holes in the surface. Closer and closer – I shut my eyes...

KA-BOOM!!!

A great flash of light consumed me and then...

darkness.

I heard faint whispers.

"Dan? Dan, are you with us, buddy?"

"I think he's coming to," another distant voice said.

White light slowly filled my eyes. I could see dark, blurred figures moving around above me. Was I dead? Was I on the alien ship? I kept blinking my eyes. The outlines of the figures were getting clearer – the voices got louder. They were human. Was I alive?!

Then I recognized Major Evans' voice. "Hello there, stranger."

"Hey, buddy," I heard Chris say.

"Di..." I tried to speak, but my throat was dry and sore.

"Get him some water," Michelle said.

Major Evans lifted my head and gave me some water. I tried again. "How did I survive? Am I alive?" I managed to force out.

"Of course you're alive, Dan. What are you talking about?" said Michelle.

"The alien ship... What happened?" I whispered.

"Alien ship? Oh, man!" Chris laughed. "I think you hit your head pretty hard, Danny."

"Dan, you've been unconscious for 5 days now. Right before we entered Neptune's orbit, we went through an asteroid field and the shuttle got banged up, but everything's okay. You jumped out of your chair and hit your head pretty hard. We've finished our mission, Dan! We're going home!" explained Michelle.

"What about Colonel Lott?" I questioned.

"I'm right here, Dan. We're all here," Colonel Lott answered.

"I thought you were dead."

"I'm fine, Dan! Never felt better! We'll have a hero's welcome when we get home." Home? Was I dreaming? Was I in Heaven or maybe Hell? What happened? Was there really an alien spaceship or did I dream the whole thing? I was too tired to care. I could feel myself drifting in and out of consciousness. I quit fighting it and closed my eyes.

